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The Washington Post

World

Israel backs down and returns frozen funds to Palestinians

By William Booth March 27

JERUSALEM — Under pressure from his advisers and the United States, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is releasing some of the tax payments Israel has withheld from the Palestinian Authority for three months, to ease a potential financial and security crisis in the occupied West Bank.

Netanyahu's office said late Friday that the prime minister will release some of the frozen funds Israel owes after the Defense Ministry and the Shin Bet security service expressed concern that the continued withholding of the money could undermine law and order in the West Bank. The Israelis said they would transfer some of the customs duties Israel collected in January and February on behalf of the Palestinians after first deducting payments for electricity, water and other services provided to Palestinians.

Israel collects customs duties on behalf of the Palestinians and has withheld payment of \$127 million a month since January. The money belongs to the Palestinians and is used by the Palestinian Authority to pay salaries. For the past three months, Palestinian civil employees, including police and security forces, have been getting only 60 percent of their salaries.

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[\[Amnesty International says Gazan militants committed war crimes\]](#)

[Netanyahu began withholding](#) the money in January after Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas pressed forward with plans to bring war-crimes charges against Israel at the International Criminal Court in The Hague for the continued construction of Jewish-only settlements in the occupied

West Bank and for the high numbers of civilian deaths in the summer war in Gaza with the Islamist militant movement Hamas.

The decision to withhold the funds was beginning to undermine security in the West Bank. In an interview this week, the chief of the Palestinian police said the freezing of funds meant he no longer had gasoline for patrol cars. He also said he was worried that morale and discipline among his 9,000 officers could begin to fray.

“Am I terrified? Yes,” said Maj. Gen. Hazim Attallah, the police chief. “There is no police force in the world whose officers, no matter how dedicated, will come to work and be willing to risk their lives for half-salaries.”

Palestinian forces coordinate with Israel and provide law enforcement in the parts of the West Bank under their control. The majority of the West Bank is under the control of the Israeli military.

Attallah called the withholding of funds by the Israelis a “reckless, dangerous game, a danger to every one of us.”

In the leadup to the recent election, Netanyahu circumvented the White House to oppose the Obama administration’s Iran diplomacy in a speech before Congress. Netanyahu later vowed that he would not allow the [creation of an independent Palestinian state](#) while he was prime minister, standing in opposition to decades of U.S. policy.

The return of funds to the Palestinians — announced as night fell and Jewish Israelis began to celebrate the Sabbath — is [one of several recent rollbacks](#) of some hard-line positions that Netanyahu took during his campaign for reelection.

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